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STATEMENT BY CONGRESSMAN PATRICK J. KENNEDY (D-RI)

VII JORNADAS DE TIMOR DA UNIVERSIDADE DO PORTO

July 17, 1997

I thank you all for allowing me to participate in the Seventh Symposium on Timor at the University of Portugal.

Recently we have had the announcement of a victory. Indonesia announced that they have dropped its participation in the Expanded IMET military training program and have scrapped plans to buy nine F-16 fighter warplanes. This action on the part of the Indonesia, is a major victory for all of us who believe in the importance of human rights.

It is a day that we can be proud of because it shows that when pressure is put on a dictatorship government, such as Indonesia's, these countries will be forced to address their outrageous and intolerable behavior.

Over the past few months, I have worked with several other members of Congress to call attention to the continued atrocities being committed by the Indonesian government. This step taken by Indonesia will further the possibility that human rights issues will finally be addressed.

I bring a unique perspective to the debate on this issue because I am one of the few members of Congress to have visited the good people of East Timor.

The recent history of the people of East Timor is a tragic one. On December 7, 1975, Indonesia invaded the East Timor. East Timor had declared independence for Portugal only one month before the invasion. Twice the United Nations has condemned the annexation and demanded that Indonesia withdraw without delay.

East Timor is a Catholic nation and Indonesia is the most populous Islamic nation. This a clear source of the tension between these two peoples. The Catholics and their churches have particularly suffered under this occupation.

More than 200,000 East Timorese out of a total population of 700,000 -- almost one third of the population -- have been killed or died of starvation as a result of being forced from villages since the invasion and the genocidal policies of the Indonesian government were unleashed on the people of East Timor. Massacres have been common practice in East Timor over the past 21 years.

Abduction, torture, suppression of dissent, and disappearances are common occurrences under the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. Suppression of the East Timorese independence movement included arbitrary detention, use of secret detention facilities, rape, and torture, which frequently results in death.

These abuses occur in large part due to the free hand given to the military to suppress the independence movement.

In December of last year, I visited the Indonesian-occupied land of East Timor. One of the greatest honors of my life was attending Christmas Midnight Mass celebrated by Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, one of the two 1996 Nobel Peace Prize winners, and spending Christmas Day with him at his home. My visit there has made my truly redouble my efforts on behalf of the people of East Timor and elsewhere in Indonesia.

There is no question that the attacks and abuses are escalating throughout Indonesia. Since Christmas Eve, there have been numerous roundups by security forces. In last week's parliamentary elections there were numerous reports of violence, including beatings and killings.

As a former Portuguese colony, the concerns of the Portuguese-Americans for the human rights situation in East Timor have been great. Indeed, as I travel across the country, it is primarily in the Portuguese communities, and of course the large Portuguese community right here in Rhode Island, that I hear concerns over the plight of these people halfway around the globe. Senator Pell raised my awareness of this issue, and I plan to carry on his fight in Congress.

This year's United States Department of State Human Rights Report clearly classifies the country of Indonesia as one of the worst violators of human rights. The report highlights those actions based on authoritarian efforts to suppress dissent, enforce cohesion and restrict opposition groups and non-governmental organizations.

This report has more than 30 pages dedicated to the intolerable human rights situation in Indonesia. I quote from the report:

"While Indonesia exhibits a surface adherence to democratic forms, its political system remains strongly authoritarian. The President, his associates, and the military still dominate the country and maintain an ideological program of social cohesion through the restriction of opposition, the repression of independent labor unions, the stifling of dissent, and other harsh measures."

In March, along with 8 of my colleagues in the House of Representatives, I introduced, the Indonesian Military Assistance Accountability Act, will attempt to confirm a commitment from Indonesia to cease the human rights violations throughout the country. The bill imposed military sanctions on the country of Indonesia if its human rights record fails to improve.

It calls for specific reforms by the Government of Indonesia in the areas of:

1) free and fair elections
2) labor rights
3) protection of non-governmental organizations, including human rights, environmental, and religious foundations
4) rights and protections for the people of East Timor
5) release of political prisoners and fair trials for such persons.

When I introduced that legislation, I could not have foreseen that the pressure from the bill would cause Indonesia to withdraw from military projects with the United States. It indicates the success that we can have in Congress when we show other countries that we will not tolerate human rights abuses.

A modified version of this bill was included in the Foreign Aid Reauthorization bill that passed through the International Relations Committee last month. The modified version does not go far enough, and I will be fighting to strengthen it.

Nevertheless, it will make a statement to the country of Indonesia that we will not tolerate their human rights abuses any more.

Indonesia repeatedly denies that there is a problem. If this is true, the Indonesian have nothing to fear by a close investigation of their human rights practices.

We have waited too long for change and it will not come without a law on the books to impose change on Indonesia. The Indonesian government has made endless promised and all of them have been broken. Last week's announcement by Indonesia is a victory, but we cannot stop here. We must continue to fight until there is true and meaningful change in that country.

Today, I congratulate the University of Portugal for their efforts to maintain this issue at the academic level where a dialogue on this situation must be created as well. This issue is important across all political, academic, and humanitarian lines. Efforts must be made at all levels, and in all avenues, to assist the people of East Timor. I encourage my friends today to continue to send a clear and unmistakable message to Indonesia -- that they must cease violating the human rights of the people of Indonesia, particularly in East Timor.

I look forward to continued work on this issue and I appreciate the opportunity to contribute my comments on East Timor to this Symposium.